

RELIGIONS DO NOT AIM FOR THE SAME GOOD

BY

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Original Editorial Summary: Are all religions basically the same? This is a question that has divided scholars of religion up till the present. The one argues that they all eye the same thing, focus on the same God, while another contends the exact opposite: God is *not* one and the same. A third pleads for a religiosity without doctrine, for that seems to be the direction of things to come.

According to emeritus professor of missiology at the Free Reformed University of Amsterdam,² Anton Wessels, the three monotheistic religions-- Judaism, Christianity and Islam-- have *three* (holy) books but *one* story. So he writes in his book *Thora, evangelie en Koran, 3 boeken, 2 steden, 1 verhaal*.³ That one story has to do with humans being addressed by the one God by means of His Word and the prophets.

Historically there are three separate communities: the Jewish congregation (Hebrew: *Qahal*), the Christian church (Greek: *ecclesia*), and the Muslim community (Arabic: *umma*). According to the Qur'an, human beings constitute only one single community, of which God is Lord. "Mankind used to belong to one community, but then they began to develop different opinions. But how fundamental are these differences?"

Wessels sheds light on the three religion from the perspective of the three books and the two cities. As already stated above, the three books are: the Thora, the Gospel and the Qur'an. The cities for Judaism and Christianity are Jerusalem and Babel, while Islam has Mecca and Medina. Jerusalem is the symbol of justice and

¹Original title: "*Religies leiden niet naar hetzelfde heil.*" *Sophie*, 3/2011, pp. 40-43. The author is not further identified. All the footnotes in this article are the responsibility of the translator, not of the author.

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³My unofficial translation of the title reads, "*Thora, Gospel and Qur'an: Three Books; Two Cities; One Story.*"

peace; Babel is the city of injustice and oppression. The ultimate perspective for the future is a new city, a new Jerusalem.

Islam has a similar kind of perspective. Mecca (literally: the holy or the sanctuary) is alleged to have been a religious centre long before the birth of Muhammad. During the period of Muhammad's first appearance there, Mecca had a reputation of injustice, oppression and persecution. Medina, to the contrary, stood for a city of justice and received the honourable title of the "City of Enlightenment."

The question as to whether Muhammad is to be counted among the prophets is, according to Wessels, to be answered affirmatively by both Jews and Christians. He wrote: "It is of the utmost importance that Jews, Christians and Muslims together read the Thora, the Gospel and the Qur'an in their common context and thus try to understand them as much as possible. This is more than ever the need today in view of the fact that these holy books are often read, understood and explained *against* each other. These three books interpellate each other, so to speak. They are in dialogue with each other and need to constantly renew this dialogue, with each of them referring to the others."⁴

According to Wessels, it is good to be aware of the fact that Moses was not a Jew, Jesus not a Christian and Muhammad not a Muslim. With this he wanted to make us realize that none of these three traditions coincide with these key figures. Each of these three are the "possession" of each of these traditions separately.

As to the question which of these three is superior, Wessels explains that it is not about the superiority of one religion over the other two. Humans are from the beginning placed before the choice to belong to the party of God or of satan.⁵ When someone joins God or His representative or His adherents, he makes the right choice. Anyone who is on God's side and is of His party (Hizbollah), will be the true victor. Victory or superiority belong only to God.

Wessel's standpoint is totally different from that of his predecessor at the Vrije Universiteit, Johan Verkuyl,⁶ who argues the exact opposite in his book *Zijn alle*

⁴If this sentence is not entirely clear to you, the original is kind of muddy as well. There are more cases like that in this article.

⁵In the original, this term is not capitalized. Though it usually is in English, I have long ago denied satan the honour of capitalization. He does not deserve it!

⁶Verkuyl was the professor under whom I wrote my dissertation, *Missionaries of Liberation in a Colonial Context: A Case Study of the Sudan United Mission*, Amsterdam, 1979.

***godsdiesten gelijk? (1981)*⁷ that they are *not* equal. In this book that enjoyed a fifth print in 1985, Verkuyl protested against the syncretistic and relativistic mentality that was becoming dominant in both church and theology at the time. He wanted to powerfully defend the confession of the one Name, Jesus Christ. What is more, his defence did not take place in isolation, for he tried to break through the barren dilemma of dialogue and witness. Dialogue and witness do not contradict each other. To the contrary, it is precisely in dialogue that the unique element of your own perspective emerges.**

God Is Not One

Stephen Prothero, the American scholar of religions at the University of Boston, proposes in his book *God Is Not One*⁸ that the notion of the unity of all religions rests on wishful thinking that has endangered the security of the world. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. It is in fact a form of theological “groupthink” or “godthink” that has turned the world into a more dangerous place by preventing us from recognizing the collisions between religions, collisions that constitute a global threat.

The competing world religions, according to him, meet each other on the level of ethics, but they sharply differ from each other in the areas of doctrine, rituals, mythology, experience and law. Perhaps these religious differences are not that relevant for mystics or scholars of religion, but for the believer on the street that’s a different issue. Not only are such religious differences of importance to the faithful, but they also have serious consequences in reality. What we need on our extremely religious planet, says Prothero, is a realistic insight into the question at which points the competing religions collide and where it is possible for them to cooperate.

He posits this proposition over against scholars like Karen Armstrong, Huston Smith and Joseph Campbell, all of whom constantly hammer away at the common points these religions share with each other. Unfortunately, we live in a world where the chance that religions throw bombs at us is as great as the possibility that they defuse them. We need idealism, but realism even more. We must understand religious people not only at their best but also at their worst. We must not only focus on blinding architecture and mild-mannered mystics, but also on religious extremists and practitioners of suicide attacks.

⁷My unofficial translation of the title reads, *Are all Religions Equal?*

⁸New York: Harper One, 2010 (388 pp.).

In other words, according to Prothero, we cannot simply throw all religions on one heap. The so-called New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daneile Dennett and Christopher Hitchens, do precisely that by declaring religion *as such* a poison for society, even one of the greatest power for evil. Prothero admits that religion *can* be a destructive power, but it can just as well be a potential for good.⁹ Here he points amongst others to the abolition of slavery and the movement for human rights.

According to Prothero, religions share their *starting* point rather than their *finishing line*, namely the simple observation that something is wrong with the world. Christians describe the problem as sin; Buddhists, as suffering; Confucians, as chaos. The question of the Biblical St. Paul “What must I do to be saved?” is, says Prothero, a purely Christian question. Only Christians seek salvation. One of the most common misunderstandings about world religions is, according to Prothero, that they ask the same questions. That’s precisely what they don’t do. Only religions that regard God as pure goodness ask themselves how a good God can allow millions of people to drown in tsunamis. What religions *do* have in common is the question what it means to be human.

The question of the unity and differences between religions is a theme in interreligious dialogue that draws wide-spread attention. Dr. Marcel Poorthuis was inaugurated this past April as professor of theology at the University of Tilburg with a lecture entitled “Dialogue between Religions: Future or Past?”¹⁰ At both Tilburg and Utrecht the professor pleaded for *theological* reflection on the uniqueness of every religion instead of researching them only in the context of the “neutral” science of religion. It has often been wrongly thought that you dilute your own religion when you engage in dialogue. It is a theological mistake when you think to strengthen Christianity by presenting “the other” as negatively as possible.¹¹ Your own Christian position is no obstacle to understanding the other, but is in the final analysis a condition.

Poorthuis identified in his oration two dangers for dialogue: postmodernism and fundamentalism. In postmodernism no self-reflection takes place, because it

⁹Translator’s note: Is that not true for every area of life, especially politics and economics? Some years ago, the World Council of Churches, after holding a series of world consultations on health care, arrived at the conclusion that the greatest cause for poor health in the world is bad politics. I have not yet heard our Atheist friends proposing the elimination of all governments because of their great potential for evil. Or, for that matter, all businesses. Why such a difference in reaction to these various structures when the basic problem is the same for all, namely the *human* problem? Most of us, I believe, know the answer!

¹⁰Original title: “*Dialoog tussen de religies: toekomst of verleden tijd?*”

¹¹ See footnote 11.

lacks a defined, historically-rooted identity. Everyone just picks whatever he prefers from our religious and spiritual multi-formity.

The danger of fundamentalism is that it absolutizes its own religion and places the others in as negative a position as possible. Fundamentalism sees the other as dangerous, as an enemy, even its own co-adherents who disagree with it. Postmodernism is characterized by a sort of powerlessness, because truth is unknowable. Fundamentalism has a tendency towards violence and to reduce everything to one's own standpoint. According to Poorthuis, the challenge of interreligious dialogue is to design a new paradigm that will benefit from an honest approach. Appreciation for another religion can develop without suppressing your own religious conviction.

Religion without Established Dogma?

Nowadays, we experience a time wherein everyone is religious in her own way. Former church journalist at the daily *Trouw*, Dr. Koert van der Velde, recently received his doctorate in the subject "Religiosity without Established Dogma."¹² According to him, many people in our time can no longer believe even though they do want to be religious. That is the tension many modern people experience who have come in one way or another out of a believing milieu, but from which they have distanced themselves for a variety of reasons.

If you adhere to religion without dogma, then you have much explaining to do, also scientifically, thus Van der Velde. All definitions of religion assume, according to him, an intimate relationship with dogma content. Christianity especially is a religion closely related to dogma, the question whether something is true or not. However, the current situation is one in which people want to develop religious experiences and to experiment with that without being bound to a traditional dogmatic system. For many today religion is not only about an awareness of the existence of an unknowable truth, but also and especially about its beauty and utility. Van der Velde is of the opinion that there is a limit or border to our understanding of reality and that you can feel yourself touched by what appears to come from the other side. He uses the term "appear", for we do not know whether it really comes from that other side.

Evaluation

¹²The original title is "*Religiositeit zonder geloof*." Though strictly and literally speaking "*geloof*" means "faith," that translation would not make sense in this context.

My opinion is that the tendency in the discipline of Religious Studies to dump all religions on one heap is an impassible route to follow. At any rate, it contradicts the concrete contents of the three monotheistic religions. That is my objection to an approach like that of the British historian of religion, Karen Armstrong, who conveniently brings all religions into the nutshell of the Golden Rule, the general command for neighbourly love. But I also object to Paul Cliteru, who in his recent book *Het monotheistisch dilemma*¹³ posited that the three monotheistic religions constitute temptations to violence via their holy books. I easily admit that religions can indeed have the potential for evil and that religious fanatics appeal to “holy” texts, but then I would want to adduce distinctions within the holy books themselves. The Old Testament has violent passages, but those are different from those in the Qur’an, which in various places directly summons to violence and murder.¹⁴

Over against a vague sense of community there is a need for a thorough knowledge of each other’s religion, precisely to truly know the other. In the end that is what brings out the truth. I would therefore definitely want to ask the question of truth, both in philosophy as well as theology. If you promote religiosity without content, as does Koert van der Velde, it becomes impossible to avoid subjectivism, a point of view in which only your own experience carries weight.

Therefore I am fully in agreement with the recent observation of Martin Kamphuis, a former Buddhist and now a Christian, in the magazine *De Oogst*,¹⁵ that Christians suffer from a poorly developed ability to make distinctions. They allow themselves to be won over by the friendly laugh of a Dalai Lama or of an apparently sympathetic Benedictine monk Anselm Grun. The former renders an easy form of Buddhism acceptable to westerners, while the latter promotes an esoteric way of self-redemption. Precisely because Christians are so uncritical, they are increasingly influenced by eastern religions. We must take seriously the religious search of modern people, but just as much the search for the right answers.

¹³My unofficial translation of the title reads: *The Monotheistic Dilemma*.

¹⁴See footnote 9. Does Van der Zwaag not make the same mistake here of which he accuses others?

¹⁵ My unofficial translation of this title: “The Harvest.”